# Remembering the 'Italian' Jewish Homes of Libya: Gender and Transcultural Memory (1967-2013).

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This work was supported by the Rothschild Foundation and the Translating Cultures theme of the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

# Remembering the 'Italian' Jewish Homes of Libya: Gender and Transcultural Memory (1967-2013).

Abstract: The article features memories of home and domestic culture of Jewish men and women displaced from Libya to Italy (the former colonial metropole), Israel and the UK after 1967. Adopting a transcultural perspective, the article exposes how ideas of Jewish, Italian and Arab culture and their gendered and racialized representations are negotiated by the interviewees. Developing an interdisciplinary method for the reading of six interviews, my aim is to offer two interrelated contributions. Firstly, to shed light on sites of transcultural experience marginalised by mainstream narratives of history, namely Jewish homes in Libya and Italy from the eve of the Italian occupation to the present. The article highlights in particular how these memories are conveyed through food and language. Secondly, by examining how memories of homes of the past emerge in the interviews, the article foregrounds the role of emotions, power and agency in contemporary mnemonic processes, stressing the gendering dimension of memory.

Keywords: transcultural memory; gender; home; intersubjectivity; Libya; Transnational Italy.

Starting an interview with a lady born in Tripoli, I asked a question about the family home. She begun with: "*era una casa normale, come questa"* ("it was a normal house, like this one")[1] and I stopped her to ask what she meant. We were sitting in the cosy living room of her home for the last decades - a Victorian terrace house in Notting Hill, London. My visual knowledge of the Italian architecture of Tripoli and my intimate delight with the English style of the interview setting could just not compute that parallel. The lady said something about a block of terrace houses behind the Tripoli Cathedral Church, and then we changed topic. But after that episode I could not ignore how my interviewees, Jewish men and women displaced from Libya to Europe and Israel in the 1960s, would often recur to that expression when asked about their homes in Tripoli: *una casa normale*, eventually *all'Italiana* (Italian style). Progressing with my fieldwork I realised that *una casa normale* may encompass flats, houses and villas built in Tripoli between the 1920s and the 1960s, according to standards and styles of Italian and European colonial building, which included facilities as kitchens, toilets and bathrooms. Dwelling such spaces, the parents of my interviewees, former inhabitants of the old city of Tripoli*,* broke with aspects of life in the *hara,* the old Jewish quarter where fellows Jews would keep sharing community baths, ovens, and promiscuity with local and immigrant members of the lower ranks of the colonial society. During colonial and postcolonial decades, the families of my interviewees developed new cultures of the body, of the making and consuming of food, of privacy and family life to acknowledged as 'Italian but not quite'– as my interviewees would say, meaning to stress their Jewish background - and that in our conversations they would often dismiss as *normali*. I wanted to learn

[1] Interview to AA (letters indicates pseudonym), London, 8/9/2013, *Mapping Living Memories* collection*,* CDEC Foundation, Milan, Italy (thereafter MLM – CDEC). All interviews featured in this article have been conducted in Italian, my translations.

more about a normative, transnational idea of Italiannes stretching across the Mediterranean via domestic cultures, colonial and postcolonial decades. I asked more questions, and the interviews shed light on sites of the urban life of Tripoli and Rome neglected by narratives of the history of Libya and Italy, yet central for the perceptions of the social and cultural identities of my interviewees. The memories of these homes conveyed transformation of Jewishness, Italiannes and Arabness. Their colonial and postcolonial tensions reverberated into the interview fieldwork through the objects, language and food that we shared.

This article investigates the making of gender and transnational histories of Libya through memories of Jewish homes. The interviews open into Ottoman mansions, terrace houses and modernist flats of Tripoli, Rome and Israel, featuring memories and acts of transmission of Libyan Jewish heritage. The interviewees are men and women of Jewish background who left Libya between the Second World War and the 1970, moving to Italy (the former colonial metropole), Israel and the UK. Their memories expose practices that shaped the mutual definition of Italian, Arab and Jewish culture at different times in history, from the eve of the Italian occupation to the present. My aim is to tease out negotiations of gendered and racialized representations and foreground the role of emotions, power and agency in the narratives of the past and the processes of identification of the interviewees. More than an ethnographic study of Libyan Jewish homes at different times of their colonial and postcolonial history, this article is an exploration of the transcultural arena in which Italian, Libyan and Jewish memory travel (Erll, 2011).

***Memory in Culture, Narratives of History***

The article develops an interdisciplinary method to read the memories of Jews from Libya in transcultural perspective. Over the last years, a wealth of scholarship from different fields has been acknowledging the transnational and transcultural spaces in which memory and history move. Historians of gender, empires and migration have been at the forefront of this shift, contending the top-down, homogenising narratives of Global and World History through accounts of embodied, subjective experiences of transculturation. These scholars have shed light on historical subjects marginalised from national, colonial and anticolonial narratives of History (Ballantyne and Burton 2009, Clancy-Smith 2011, Gabaccia 2000) examining intersecting axes of gender, class and ethnic identification and their multiple tensions between the local and the global (Midgley, Twells and Carlier, 2016). Rather than discarded, the national is now being contextualised in wider transcultural frameworks that engage critically with the exclusive nature of nationalist narratives of History. Examining the impact of such narratives in contemporary processes of identification, recent scholarship in Memory Studies has identified the national as but one of the interlocking scales in which memories and cultures are constantly produced (De Cesari and Rigney, 2014). Astrid Erll has recently pointed out (Erll, 2011) how Memory Studies have long been examining the mnemonic

frameworks of national cultures, or the culture and memory of single social formations such as a religious group, a social class or an ethnicity. Developing a transcultural perspective on memory instead means engaging with the movement of people, forms and media of memory across social, linguistic and political borders, and with the multiple possibilities of memorialisation in contemporary culture. The memories of the Jews from Libya offer a unique perspective to explore the transcultural nature of Italian, Libyan and Jewish memory narratives because they intersect them all, exposing their mutual tensions. This article examines such tensions at different times in history and how they reverberate through the mnemonic processes of men and women interviewees.

Jewish memories have historically been developed at the intersection of national and diasporic dimensions, and a new wave of scholarship is now engaging with the sheer diversity of Jewish transnational and multilingual experiences. Historians researching the trajectories of Jews of the Middle East (Bashkin, 2014) and North Africa (Benichou Gottreich and Schroeter, 2011; Benichou Gottreich, 2008) have been acknowledging the intensified activation of Arab Jewish identities in the present, and engaged with their articulation in the past. Recent scholarship on the literature of Sephardic and Mizrahi diasporas (Miccoli, 2017) has been giving two important theoretical and methodological contributions to this emerging field of studies. Firstly, by calling for more inclusive and complex frameworks in which re-contextualise the so-called European Jewish paradigm, i.e. the foregrounding of the history of Zionism, of European Jews and of the memory of the Shoah as universal Jewish heritage. Considering Sephardic memories and historical experiences, these scholars have been examining the thriving processes of memorialisation in Sephardic literature, developing fresh research on the tensions between history and memory. Secondly, while focusing on literatures, these scholars also call for a broader understanding of a field 'which goes beyond the primacy often ascribed in Western canons to novels and includes a larger range of writings and authorial experiences that, however, also relate to one another as regards themes and memorial trends' (Miccoli 2017:4) In other words, while prompting the development of more inclusive concepts of literature, they expose the heterogeneity of media of memory of the Sephardic diasporas, and their intertextuality across multiple processes of memorialisation and heritagisation (Trevisan, Miccoli, Parfitt, 2013). Piera Rossetto's work on the mnemonic processes of the Jews from Libya has fed into this scholarship, examining the re-shaping of Libyan Jewish identities in the public spheres of Italy and Israel (Rossetto 2015 and 2017).

There are multiple ways of remembering in culture, and rather than opposing memory and history this article aims to examine their interaction in a wider and transcultural framework. As Erll, Young and Nunning put it, 'there are different modes of remembering identical past events (…) Myth, religious memory, political history, trauma, family remembrance, or generational memory are different modes of referring to the past…History is but yet another mode of cultural memory, and historiography its

specific medium'. (Erll, Young, Nunning, 2009). The memories of the Jews from Libya shed light on disregarded patterns connecting Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, challenging neat accounts of nation-building, decolonization and democracy (Clancy-Smith 2010). History narratives have long strived to build cohesive, neatly defined communities from progressive myths of struggle, survival, national - or Jewish - regeneration. The trajectories of my interviewees trouble neat narratives and definitions of Jewish, Libyan, Italian identities. The memories of my interviews are in constant tensions with them.

It is worth to outline the main tensions that have long underlied the historiography on the Jews of Libya within the wider field of history of Sephardic Jews in North Africa and the Middle East. Early scholarship stemming from Italian (De Felice, 1978) and Israeli (Roumani, 2007) perspective has investigated the history of Libyan Jews from the eve of Italian occupation to the 1970s, representing Europe and the West as driving forces of modernity and civilization that Jews would embrace and Muslim reject - rejecting many other signs of 'Westerness', modernity and civilization altogether. More recently, other scholars have been giving more nuanced accounts of the history of the Jews from North Africa and the Middle East, examining the processes of memorialisation of their displacement from multiple perspectives (Goldberg, 1990; Baussant, 2012), including the Muslims' (Abécassis and Dirèche, 2012). Two significant arguments emerge from recent scholarly debates. Firstly: early narratives applied a simplified notion of an alleged "emancipation" brought to North Africa and the Middle East in colonial times, overlooking histories of multiple modernities, transcultural contacts, and individual Jewish and non-Jewish trajectories traced across the Mediterranean since the age of the European empires. Secondly: scholarship that conflate very different histories of Jewish communities from the Middle East and North Africa into a single tale of 'Jews of Arab Lands' (f.e. Bensoussan, 2012), foster the so called 'neolachrymose narratives of the history of the Jews' (Benichou-Gottreich, 2008), imagined as inescapable destiny of exile and persecution. Written in historiography, these narrative tensions resonate across further circuits and media of the memory of the Jews from Libya.

Focusing on a series of interviews with Italian Jews from Libya, this article intends to shed light on the broader dynamism of their memory, exposing the variety of its media. Reflecting on the intersubjective relation between interviewer and interviewee (Passerini, 2007), my analysis exposes the performative quality of mnemonic processes, their gendered and intergenerational patterns. Examining figures that conveyed traumas, fantasies and cultural tensions in the interviews, I have identified three recurrent mnemonic processes: remembering, forgetting and fantasizing. I will introduce the context and subjects of my research before entering in the mnemonic processes.

## Rooms and Hosts: Context and Subjects of Research

The article draws from interviews with six men and women born in Libya between the early 1930s and the mid-1950s, who are now living in Italy, Israel and the UK.[2] Through a semi-structured format, the interviews aimed to explore the memories of Libya and the Jewish background of the interviewees, who contributed to a collection of personal stories of the Jews from Libya promoted by an established Italian Jewish archive.[3] Most of the interviewees staged our meeting in their homes rather than in offices, community centres or other public places, and they would continuously refer to objects and memories at hand. Images of flats, houses and villas of Tripoli and Benghazi floated in the domestic interiors of Milan, Rome, London and Tel Aviv where we would touch objects and family pictures, sharing food that convey their memories. Collapsing distinctions between places and times, images of home and domestic culture underpinned the interview narratives.

The ladies interviewed are born from families of the bourgeois élite of Tripoli and Benghazi between the mid-1930s and the mid-1950s, and they belong to the first generation of women educated to degree level, either in Italy or in Europe. They consider themselves to be Jews, and in many extent, they also consider themselves to be Italian, although they might hold other, or multiple (i.e. European or Israeli) passports. Their families belong to a cultural and economic élite of Jewish and multilingual background that since the 19th century would act as agents, business correspondents, and even consuls of European nations. These subjects played a substantial part in the circulation of European languages and cultures in North African and Mediterranean societies, and in Libya they certainly played a pivotal role in the spreading of Italian.

In precolonial and colonial decades, passports and forms of citizenship were tools of the geopolitical game of the European expansion in the Mediterranean. In 1870 the Crémieux decree was implemented to secure French influence in the area by imposing French naturalization to the Jews of Algeria: Arab Jewish traders from Tripoli and Tunis then took residence in Algeria for gaining eligibility, and in so doing, they also boosted French demographic power, while Arab Muslims would be progressively relegated to the status of colonial subjects. Similarly, some Jewish traders and businessman of Tripoli became formally resident of Rome, while keeping their thriving

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[2] The interviews are deposited at the CDEC Foundation (Milan, Italy), and they have been carried out in 2012-13 by the author and her co-investigator, Dr Piera Rossetto, for the Research Project *Mapping Living Memories: the Jewish Diaspora from Libya across Europe and the Mediterranean*. This article has been developed within the framework of the AHRC Research Project *Transnationalizing Modern Languages: Mobility, Identity and Translation in Modern Italian Culture* http://www.transnationalmodernlanguages.ac.uk and thanks to a Visiting Fellowship at the Centre for the Study of Cultural Memory at the Institute of Modern Languages Research, IMLR, London. Early drafts have been presented at the 2014 Berkshire Conference of Women Historians in Toronto (Canada) and at the Comparative Literature Seminar of Sydney University (Australia). A heartfelt thanks to Jenny Burns and Julia Clancy-Smith for their generous and sharp comments.
[3] For details on the theoretical and methodological aspects of the project see P. Rossetto and B. Spadaro, "Across Europe and the Mediterranean Sea. Exploring Jewish Memories from Libya," *Annali Di Ca' Foscari* 50, no. 1 (42) (December 2014), doi:10.14277/ISSN/ID.

Mediterranean trading business from North Africa. Jewish traders contributed to the formation of an élite of Italian language and connections for the small society of colonial Tripoli, as families of fellow coreligionists would move to Libya from Italy, marrying into local families. In times of European expansion, Jewish emancipation, and elaboration of modern regimes of citizenship which would dramatize the distance between fellow Jews of 'local' and 'European' background (Schreier, 2010; Schroeter, 2012), the formation of families of "mixed" (i.e. Italian and indigenous) Jewish background in Tripoli stands out as a remarkable exception (Simon, 1992: 5). A new élite keen to identify with the transnational and trans-imperial circles of a modern, cosmopolitan Jewish bourgeoisie that would patronise the coreligionists resisting processes of European acculturation begun to emerge. Some local Jewish families would Italianise their Arab names, found newspapers in Italian and send their children to Italian schools. As a matter of fact, the first Italian school in Libya was opened in 1876 by initiative of a lady of this élite, who invited in Tripoli a teacher co-religionist from Pitigliano, Giannetto Paggi. Yet the tensions between immigrant and indigenous coreligionist which haunted Jewish communities across metropoles and empires reverberated also in Italy and Libya (Spadaro, 2015), as manifested in the showcasing of a project of 'Public housing for indigenous Jews' (*Case popolari per Israeliti Indigeni*) by architect Umberto Di Segni.

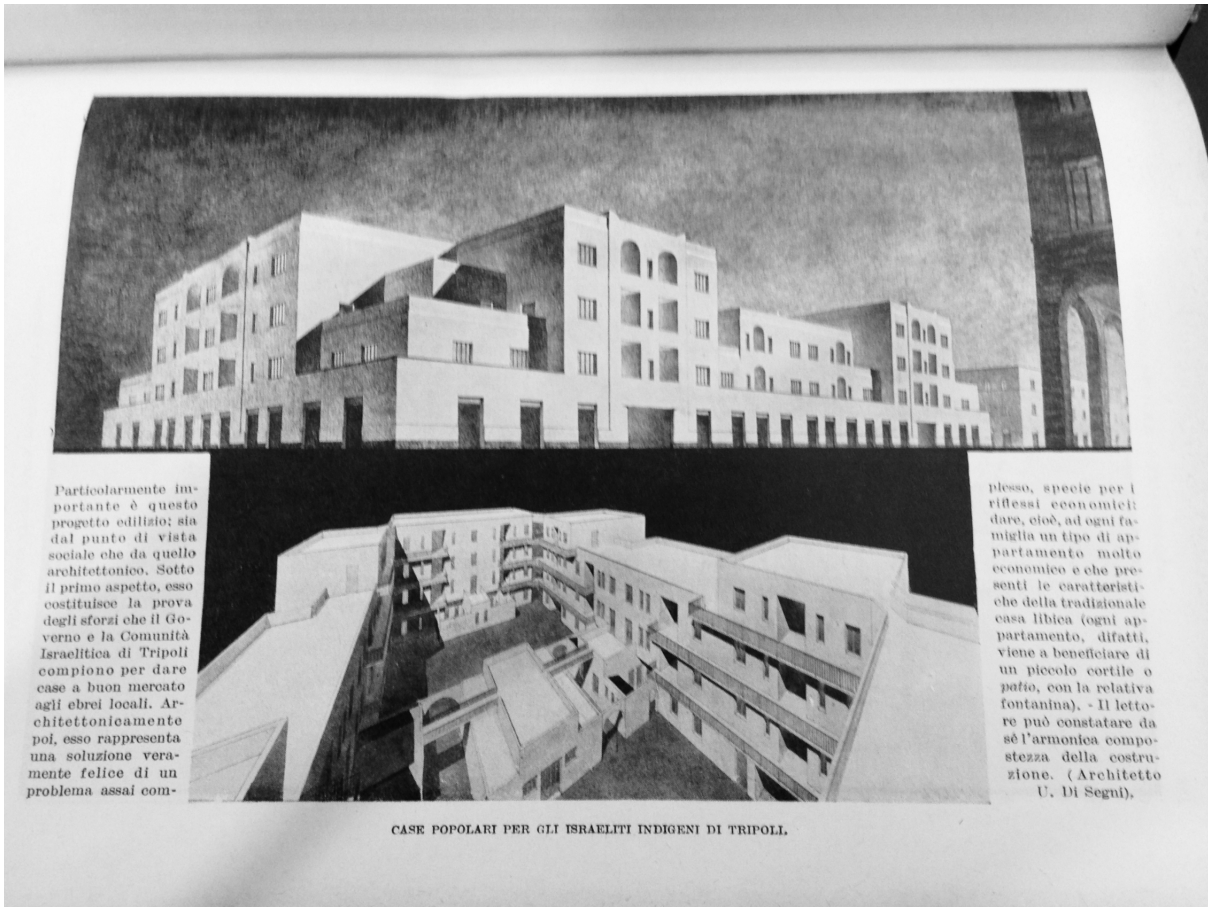


**Figure 1:** Architect Umberto Di Segni, project of public housing for indigenous Jews (1933) as featured in A. Piccioli, *La nuova Italia d'Oltremare. L'opera del fascismo nelle colonie italiane*, Verona, 1933.

Umberto Di Segni was born in Tripoli in 1892 in the family of a Jewish teacher from Livorno, who named him after the King of Italy. As a young man, Umberto was sent to study at the *Accademia di Belle Arti* in Rome and to serve the Italian Army in the First World War, where he lost one arm in the dramatic battle of the Carso (Arbib, 2010). Back in Tripoli, Umberto became involved in the designing of many official projects of urban development, including the *Fiera di Tripoli* (Tripoli Exhibition, 1930-32 and 1933) whose housing development was destined to the families of bank accountants and public employees that would make the bedrock of the urban middle-classes. Di Segni's project of public housing for indigenous Jews of Tripoli would not be built, but showcased in a number of exhibitions and publications to illustrate the civilizing accomplishments of Italian colonialism in Libya. The housing project was meant to convey an architectural synthesis of modern and local standards of housing. In a volume aimed to showcase the accomplishment of Italian colonial rule, the project stands as a demonstration of an alleged joint endeavour of Italian and Jewish authorities to provide decent housing at affordable rates for indigenous Jews (Piccioli, 1933). Yet despite recurring celebration of the Jewish pioneers of Italiannes in Libya, and the actual linguistic, economic, political and emotional ties of these people to Italy, in their civil rights under Italian colonialism were not to be taken for granted.

In 1940, when the Italian anti-Semitic laws were implemented also in Libya, Jews of Italian citizenship lost their jobs, social prominence, and in some cases their lives. Their feelings of identification with Italian culture and Italy however hold strong. After the Second World War, the families of my interviewees supported, rather than joining, the clandestine and mass migration of Jews of lower class and rural background to Palestine and the newly founded state of Israel. They would stress their role as pioneers of Italian modernity in Libya by distinguishing themselves from *gli importati* (the imported people), the Italian settlers arrived in Libya only from the 1930s. Being still confident in the skills, credits and connections to play between independent Libya and Europe they stayed in Tripoli and Benghazi, raising their children – my interviewees - in a cosmopolitan environment of uncertain political outcomes.

In 1967, when the safety of the Jews in Libya would be no longer guaranteed by King Idris, these families repaired in Italy – rather than in Israel - as refugees or 'repatriated' citizens. Rome was the closest, more familiar and convenient place for waiting and negotiating the outcomes of the political turbulence of decolonization undergoing in Libya and beyond. In Israel, the immigrant Jews from the Middle East and North Africa would be identified as *mizrahim* and Arab Jews, whilst among the Jewish communities of Rome and Milan they would be named *Tripolini* (Tripolinians). The Italian Jews from Libya would not fit into any Arab nationalist projects, nor category of the social and cultural imaginary in Italy at the time. Since the mid-19$^{th}$ century, the trajectories of these people have been tracking multiple shifts and manifestations of Italian, Jewish and Arab belonging. Such shifts

resonate through mainstream narratives of European and Jewish History and through the self-narratives of my interviewees.

## Mnemonic Processes: Remembering, Forgetting, Fantasizing

Examining the images of home and domestic cultures in the narratives of my interviewees, I have identified three different, and interrelated, mnemonic processes: remembering, forgetting, and fantasizing. Remembering and fantasizing are examined in the next sections of this article, while forgetting intertwines both processes, showing the dynamism of memory. All three processes capture tensions embedded in the definition of Jewish background in colonial and independent Libya, and how these tensions resonate in the interviewees' narratives. The interviews also illuminate moments of social and cultural transformation around traditional practices of the Jews of Libya, which manifest negotiation of gender and intergenerational relations.

Many of the interviewees from Tripoli lived in apartment blocks raised by their fathers in the areas surrounding the Cathedral Church and *Corso Sicilia*, a busy high street connecting the *Lido* (the beach facilities built in Tripoli in the 1930s) with the commercial and political hub of *Piazza Italia*. Since the eve of the Italian colonization, their families, like those of the Muslim élites of Tripoli, would rent accommodations to immigrants from Europe, eventually founding themselves labelled as 'greedy Jewish landlords' in the Italian newspapers.[4] As in many sister colonial cities on the North African shores, a new Jewish petty bourgeoisie quitted the old Medina and their quarters of physical and cultural promiscuity, participating in the development of new hubs of urban life.

After the bombing of the Second World War, some of the wealthiest families reiterated this process of social and urban elevation, moving into the villas of *Città Giardino* and *Giorgimpopoli*, two residential areas built during the colonial decades which in the 1950s and 1960s became very popular among British, Americans and international employees of the Libyan government and Oil industry. Some of my interviewees grew up in this neighbourhood.

***Remembering: Consuming Arab Jewish Heritage***

[4] See examples of the anti-Semitic tones of the Tripoli newspaper 'La Nuova Italia' in the years 1913-1916. On the role of Jewish élites in the urban expansion of 'Italian' Tripoli, see François Dumasy, *Au Milieu et à Part. Prestige et Centralité à Tripoli de Libye Pendant La Colonisation Italienne, 1911-1943*, in Isabelle Backouche, Fabrice Ripoll, Sylvie Tissot, Vincent Veschambre (eds) *La Dimension spatiale des inégalités,* Rennes: Presse Universitaire de Rennes, 2011 : 209–32.

In the 1950s and 1960s the 'Italian' villas of *Città Giardino* staged new forms of commodification of the Arab-Jewish heritage of their inhabitants, as it was apparent also in the spatial organization of these homes. For example, the rooftop apartments of the villa of one of my interviewees' family was destined to the ritual preparation of chickens for the *kapparah* [5]. In the garden, a traditional baking oven reproducing the community oven would be built in a corner to bake the *ftere* (traditional flat bread). Overall, forms of commodification of the Libyan Jewish heritage convey a confident sense of distance from the Arab population, enabling the integration of women of the *hara* external to the families in the performance of tradition. Hence for *Pesah* and other Jewish holidays, women of the old town of Tripoli would be hired to prepare the poultry and bake the *ftere* for the family and guests, since the host ladies, mothers of my interviewees, would be busy with other, less traditional and more sophisticated tasks for the organization of the party.

Further examples of forms of displaying the Libyan Jewish heritage emerge from the pictures of women and children in Libyan-Jewish outfit.

**Figure 2: CDEC Archives (Milan) *Mapping Living Memories* Collection**

These pictures, taken at the time of the garden parties in *Città Giardino*, populate the family albums of my interviewees along with older photographs of couples in European and Jewish outfit. They

[5] Old Jewish ritual performed by slaughtering a cock per male and a hen per female member of the family. The meat is given to the poor or eaten by the owners, who donate the value to the poor.

manifest a recurring tendency towards self-orientalizing, or self-exoticizing practices which would not been possible in absence of a confident sense of a Libyan Jewish heritage fundamentally separated from the Arabs. Like the example above, many of these photos would be taken as portraits of perspective brides whom, while raised in suburban domestic environment fully-equipped with goods and facilities imported by their family trades – such as American vehicles, white goods and fizzy drinks - were still expected to perform the role of Jewish mothers and transmit that heritage to their children.

Historians of the Ottoman Empire have read the widespread 19th century practice of self-portraying in Jewish costumes as signs of political belonging performed by individuals living in times when 'national belonging was paramount, and in which being a modern citizen of the world was predicate upon being a citizen of a particular state (…) when people around the globe were turning to folkloric nationalism as an anchor in the changing world' (Phillips-Cohen, 2014:368). The photos of my interviewees in Jewish costume manifest new practices of heritage reclaiming and self-fashioning, in a context in which the commodification of Arab-Jewish heritage would be wield as a sign of social and cultural distinction. Those photos, along with other objects which populate the narratives of my interviewees - such as the finest Italian *Richard Ginori* china table sets, the silver trays handcrafted in the souk of Tripoli, or the exquisite pieces of trousseau purchased in Italy - compose the material and mnemonic framework of ladies of the Jewish élite of Libya.

The elegant Milanese home of a lady from *Città Giardino,* whom I interviewed with a friend, was one of these settings in which stories of objects would reveal the complexity of these memories. One of the two ladies repeatedly dismissed their lifestyle in Tripoli as *normale*, 'very Occidentalised', albeit 'not quite Italian' and – most importantly - rooted in two millennia of history of the Jews in Libya. The indigenous grandmother of this lady dressed in barracan and was born in the *hara*, the Jewish quarter of the Old Town of Tripoli where the interviewee had never set foot. Indeed, few of the interviewees born in modern flats and villas from the 1940s onwards manifest interest or even curiosity for the homes of their indigenous elders*,* unless they convey fascinating fantasies, as we will see. This forgetfulness is a resilient tension in their memories, baring traces of the shifting position of the Jews as members of the white élite in colonial Libya. The forms of commodification of Libyan Jewish heritage described above convey a confident disentanglement from Arab and non-European roots. The interview with the ladies instead provided further examples of the movements of these memories:

**Interviewee 1:** It was very Italian as a style, and also as a lifestyle...
**Interviewee 2: …**a very Italian lifestyle, unless you wanted to play a joke. Which was what a friend of mine once did, inviting some friends for dinner. She wanted to eat some couscous. Rather than laying the table, she opened it, placing at the centre...

**Interviewer 1:** …a couscous pan! (*couscoussiera*)
**Interviewee 2:** No, it wasn't a couscous pan - it was a massive bucket, in wrought-iron, full of cous-cous. She put around various bowls with sauces and dipping, saying: "Here we go, eat with your hands! Put what you want in your couscous, and eat it with your hands!"
**Interviewee 1:** Well, this was how the Arabs would do! We wouldn't, but the Arabs used to eat this way!
**Barbara Spadaro:** But in this case, it seems like she was trying something different, wasn't she? What was it? A dinner party?
**Interviewee 2:** Yes, a kind of party, it was a joke between friends. And in the end she put all that stuff aside, and set the table properly. [6]

In this excerpt, the interviewees recall the experience of 'eating like Arabs' as a form of entertainment in the exotic dinner party staged by a friend. One of the ladies emphasizes that the Arabs would normally eat with hands, while they would not; and the episode is archived suggesting that the host lady had to provide cutlery and a full table set for her guests. Both the episode and the emphasis in the narrative mark shifts and ongoing negotiation of the Arab-Jewish heritage of these ladies of the Jewish bourgeoisie. This excerpt illuminate changes in social practices of the villas of *Città Giardino* in the 1960s, as well as tensions underlying definitions of Arab, Italian and Jewish belonging.

The next interview further illustrates how Libyan-Jewish heritage may be negotiated through forms of commodification, particularly language use, and self-narration. The family of this lady negotiated the multilingual and multicultural environment of Tripoli from a very peculiar position, which exposes multiple threads of transcultural exchange. The interviewees' mother was of Sephardi, Judeo-Hispanic background, the father a businessman from Benghazi. The couple shared Zionist sentiment, and supported the clandestine migration (*aliyah*) of their coreligionists to Israel through the American Joint Committee. This migration emptied of Jews the rural villages and the poor urban neighbourhoods of Libya, provoking also a fundamental shift in the presence of Arab Jewish culture in the homes of the bourgeois families:

**Interviewee:** There was a deep dichotomy in Tripoli between wealthy people and the poor who lived in the *hara*. I knew about the *hara* from other people's stories, and because that's where our servants

[6] Interview with BB and CC, Milan, 11/3/2013, MLM-CDEC. Italian transcription **- Intervistata 1:** Come stile era molto italiano, come modo di vivere anche...**Intervistata 2:** Modo di vivere molto italiano, a meno che non volevi fare uno scherzo; questo l'aveva fatto una mia amica, che ha invitato un po' di amici a cena perché voleva del cuscus. Non ha preparato la tavola, l'ha aperta, e ha messo nel mezzo una.... **Intervistatrice 1:** Couscoussiera! **Intervistata 2:** No, non era una couscoussiera, era una bacinella enorme, in ferro battuto, con il cous cous dentro e poi i vari tegami con i condimenti tutto intorno...dicendo qui si mangia con le mani, ognuno mette quello che vuole dentro il cous cous, si mangia con le mani **Intervistata 1:** Eh, ma in effetti così facevano gli arabi! Noi no, ma gli arabi facevano così! **Intervistatrice 2:** Ma in questo caso era per fare una cosa diversa, cos'era, una festa? **Intervistata 2:** Si, uno scherzo, così tra amici, però poi ha spostato tutto e fatto la tavola come si deve.

would come from. We wanted Jewish servants in order to keep all things *kosher.* Later they all went to Israel, their *aliyah* emptied the *hara.* I remember how I would spend summer volunteering under a lady for the Joint to prepare these miserable people, she helped them because Israel wanted healthy and sturdy people. We volunteered, they all went to Israel, and therefore we had to take Muslim servants. [7]

The memories of the clandestine migration that in 1948 emptied the *hara* of Jewish servants are recurrent in the interviews with women of the bourgeois families that stayed in independent Libya. As previously seen, a few women from the *hara* would still be available to prepare food and Jewish rituals for special occasion, but after 1948 most of families had to hired Muslim Arabs or Italian servants, loosing also this contact with local Jewish tradition and the Judeo-Arabic dialect spoken in the *hara*. As an example, the interviewee explains how in her family speaking Arabic was considered so vulgar that her mother would hire French-speaking servants from Fezzan to police the use of language at home. Similarly, the use of Spanish and Ladin at home would mark the sophisticate maternal background, as the Jewish families of the élite of Tripoli would speak mainly Italian and Judeo-Arabic - or the vanishing traces of it. The interviewee thus claims to have been able to discover her Libyan Jewish heritage only much later, and in Italy. In the 1950s, she had been in fact one of the first young ladies sent to University in Italy from Libya, to study Chemistry, and subsequently she had married into an old prestigious Jewish family of Tuscany. In the excerpt below she talks about the unexpected discovery of her Libyan Jewish heritage, which occurred only in 1967, with the arrival in Livorno of some Jews fleeing from Benghazi:

**Interviewee:** …and there they were, these people from Benghazi, and at that time I was an adult, no longer brainwashed by my mother! So I went seeking for my Libyan origins: I went in these women's houses, learning from them Libyan cooking, how to cook couscous...
**BS:** And this happened in Livorno?
**Interviewee:** Sure, in Livorno! Why would I erase a culture just because my mother despises it? It's a culture of mine, and I want to learn it, so I started studying Arabic, talking to this people, their food, their songs…and I discovered a wonderful side, a less Western side maybe, but it's a culture as well, that's it, and giving it up would be silly. I speak Hebrew, and that helped. Then I got a Moroccan

[7] Interview with DD, Livorno, 14/7/2013. MLM, CDEC. **Intervistata:** A Tripoli c'era una dicotomia tra la gente che stava bene e i poveri che vivevano nella *hara*. Io conoscevo la *hara* solo per sentito dire perché avevamo le domestiche che venivano da lì perché noi per avere tutto *casher* volevamo le domestiche ebree. Dopo la loro *aliyah*, la *hara* tutta è andata in Israele, e io ricordo che passavo l'estate con una signora che andava per conto della Joint a preparare questa gente di una miseria infinita, lei li aiutava perché Israele li voleva sani (…) Sono andati tutti in Israele e quindi abbiamo dovuto prendere dei domestici musulmani. Ma siccome c'era questa ripugnanza - sbagliatissima! - verso la cultura araba mamma preferiva che parlassimo francese con i domestici. Ma comunque un po' l'Arabo l'abbiamo imparato, ma mamma non lo sapeva mica, nella nostra famiglia era considerata una cosa volgarissima parlare Arabo. Gli ebrei di Tripoli parlavano tutti Arabo, però in casa nostra si doveva parlare Spagnolo e Ladino.

housekeeper for a while...so officially I don't speak Arabic, but I do, just few words, and I do understand the language. [8]

In this narrative, the Libyan-Jewish heritage consists of culinary culture and a language awareness developed through Moroccan dialect, rather than those spoken in Libya. This memory of Libyan-Jewish culture is a self-narrative that unfolds two threads of intersubjective tensions: the emotional tensions within the lady's social and family background, and the performance of our encounter. Interviewed by an Italian female scholar, the lady framed the discovery and appreciation of her Libyan-Jewish heritage within the process of emancipation from the snobbery of her mother and the narrow-mindedness of Jewish circles in Italy.

**BS:** What triggered this process? Perhaps the fact of becoming a mother yourself?
**Interviewee:** No, simply I was no longer dominated by my mother. And I loved my North African community, it was a tremendous joy to welcome them…later, even my mother, once in Italy, had to acknowledge that these people are better than those of the Jewish community of Livorno. She would never admit that openly, but we knew that. These people are so generous, so warm! Their home is always open. They are kind, intelligent, good people with great IQ! Think about how they succeed in business in Rome, their triumph over local retailers… [9]

The lady claims the richness of her cultural background against the social and cultural elitism of her mother and coreligionists in Italy, who would value her European rather than Libyan heritage in first place – reproducing colonial and cultural tensions between the Italian and Libyan Jewish communities. Presenting herself as an open-minded, independent and sophisticated woman was very important in the self-narrative of this interviewee. Throughout our meeting, she would emphasize her ability to value, and commodify, selected aspects of Libyan-Jewish heritage as well as her choice to apply her Chemistry degree in the family kitchen rather than in a laboratory job. As for many other women of her generation and social background, this ability would demonstrate her social and cultural

[8] Interview with DD, Livorno, 14/7/2013. MLM, CDEC. **Intervistata:** Ecco che sono arrivati questi bengasini, e io ormai ero adulta e non subivo più il lavaggio del cervello di mia madre sono andata alla caccia, alla ricerca delle mie origini libiche, e andavo a casa di tutte queste signore, mi sono fatta insegnare la cucina libica, ho imparato a fare il cous cous **BS:** e tutto questo a Livorno…**Intervistata:** certo a Livorno! Perché io devo annullare una mia cultura solo perché mia madre la disprezza? È una mia cultura e la voglio imparare, e quindi ho cominciato a studiare veramente l'arabo, a cercare di parlare con loro, i loro cibi, canzoni, e ho scoperto un lato bellissimo che sarà meno occidentale, ma anche quella è una cultura, ed è stupido rinunciare. Conoscendo l'ebraico, non mi è venuto difficile: non so parlare, ma capisco, so dire una parola o due. Poi ho avuto una domestica marocchina, mi sono allenata...insomma, ufficialmente io non so l'arabo, ma..!

[9] Interview with DD, Livorno, 14/7/2013. MLM, CDEC**. BS:** cosa le ha fatto scattare tutto questo? Il fatto di avere dei figli? **Intervistata:** no, il fatto di non essere più sotto l'influenza materna, e l'amore che avevo per la mia comunità nordafricana e la gioia con cui li ho accolti, che poi mia mamma arrivando in Italia si è resa conto quanto erano superiori alla comunità ebraica di Livorno, non l'ha mai detto ufficialmente ma l'abbiamo capito perché questa gente ha una generosità e un'ospitalità, la casa è aperta per tutti, gentilezza, bontà, intelligenza, un grande IQ, perché pensi che quelli che sono andati a Roma hanno fatto le scarpe a tutti i commercianti italiani...

skills of cosmopolitan woman. Yet they also reflect the Eurocentric and bourgeois gaze embedded in her background and historical trajectory. Both would be constantly negotiated by her subjectivity and emotions. At the end of my visit, to complete our conversation, the lady showed me a display hanging in the living room with photographs of couples of extraordinary characters of her family: her jet-setters Sephardi grandparents in a trip to New York, and her grandparents from Benghazi, her beloved '*nonni barracanosi'* – 'grandparents in barracan', as she nicknames them.

Figure 3: Domestic display of family portraits: grandparents in NY and 'grandparents in barracan', photos of the author.

### *Fantasies*

A recurrent process in personal and family stories of home is fantasizing. Being in constant tension with forms of forgetting and remembering, this process equally reflects the emotional and dynamic nature of memory. Some of the figures emerged through the interview fieldwork beare traces of nostalgia and traumas only apparently forgotten, or indeed transmitted through the imaginative investment of one generation in the memory of another – a process that Marianne Hirsch termed postmemory (Hirsch, 2012). Wheter the emotional charge, the fantasies of my interviewees convey in elaborated figures a human desire for memory. Fantasies also expose the multiple geographies and temporalities in the intervievees' mnemonic processes: their clashes and disjunctions indeed challenge the linearity and objectivity of scholarly narratives, calling for ways of reading the transcultural and intersubjective nature of memory.

The excerpts below feature memories of the same old Ottoman house as remembered by two sisters during separate interviews. The images of this home of French-Ottoman ancestors convey a full strand of family memories and acts of intergenerational transmission, with very different outcomes though.

**BS:** …so you don't know which was the house of your grandparents in the *hara* (the Jewish quarter in the old town of Tripoli)
**Interviewee:** No, I actually know which was the house, I've seen some pictures, and my father explained me that…I've been there once with my uncle, they still had the soap factory in there. The Arab houses were centred around a main squared court, with the different rooms for the family opening on the four sides. The court was the main hub of family life in the house. My family had the soap factory, whereas in other families women would cook in a corner and the shoemaker would work on the other side… I remember – and I still have some photos, but you know how people tend to fantasize on this sort of things…Perhaps if I could go back with a time machine, I would find just petty, ordinary things, but I remember the beautiful, golden-framed mirrors from Venice, that my grandmother brought along with her. They would hang large and heavy like in a museum. And the flowery Murano glasses, the beautiful carpet, and the two sculpted lions at the entrance. They might well be made of chalk rather than marble but they were rampant, with jaws wide open, and they were massive, same height as my father. The house was named after the sculptures, *la casa dei leoni* (the lions' house). And it had a staircase at the entrance. My mother's house in Benghazi was similar to my father's, but unfortunately when as a child I would go to see my grandmother, she was living in a very ordinary flat (*un appartamento normalissimo*), a second floor flat furnished with a fridge, a stove, a bed and a cupboard. [10]

In contrast with the grandmother's *casa normale* of the 1950s in the modernist 'Italian' quarter of Bengasi, the ancient Arab house of the ancestors in the old city of Tripoli emerges as an enchanted repository of all sorts of objects and memorabilia, a relic of a past that despite all the moving forward in times of intense transformation, was not disavowed by the interviewee's father – with all the ambiguities and every-day negotiations bound up with it. Photos of these old houses are rare, whereas portraits of their inhabitants are common in the family albums of the interviewees. In fact, memory flourishes, via fantasy and imagination, through the beautiful family portraits of 'quite-Europeans' in traditional and modern costumes, nurturing images of enchanted houses as lost treasures in family

[10] Interview with EE, Rome, 12/11/2012, MLM – CDEC. BS: quindi la casa dei nonni nella hara tu non sai quale fosse? Intervistata: no, so qual è perchè ho visto delle foto e mio padre mi ha spiegato. (...) Allora una volta andammo con mio zio per vedere qualcosa che non funzionava, lì c'era ancora il saponificio. Le case arabe avevano un grande quadrato come atrio, e tutto intorno le stanze per i familiari o del capostipite, mentre nell'atrio, nel grande cortile succedeva tutto, tutta la vita della famiglia; loro avevano la fabbrica del sapone, presso altre famiglie c'erano le donne che cucinavano, oppure chi aveva il calzolaio nell'angolo faceva le scarpe..(...) Io ricordo – e ho ancora delle foto, ma certe cose le mitizzi: forse se potessi tornare indietro con una macchina del passato troverei delle bazzecole, ma io ricordo degli specchi bellissimi con cornici dorate, intarsiate, portati da mia nonna da Venezia, messi come nei musei, grandissimi, pesantissimi; lampadari di Murano con tutti i fiorellini, tappeti molto belli, e all'entrata i due leoni, che forse erano di gesso, non di marmo, ma avevano la bocca spalancata, la zampa alzata ed erano molto grandi, dell'altezza di mio padre, che davano il nome alla casa, la Casa dei Leoni; e poi c'era una scalinata per entrare. Anche quella di mia madre era una casa di questo tipo, ma quando andavo io a trovare mia nonna a Bengasi ormai abitavano in un appartamento normalissimo, un secondo piano con un frigorifero, un gas, un letto e un armadio.

tales. These are combined with other figures premediating (Erll, 2008) the interviewee's memory, often grounded in their personal experience or knowledge. In this case, the interviewee begun with an ethnographic description of Arab houses from which (as she explained early in the interview) she had drawn from family accounts, childhood memories, and recent experience as a tourist in historical sites in Europe and North Africa.

In another interview excerpt, a sister of the interviewee above evokes the same house through similar patterns and images. In this second excerpt the emotional charge of the memory of the old house is very different, as the fading images convey emotions of loss and traumatic detachment from the past. The trauma stretches throughout years in which this family, as many others fleeing independent Libya in the 1960s, were forced to suspend their projects and expectations due to the insecurity and uncertainness of their lives as Jews in Libya and refugees in Italy. Such protracted suspension severely marked the generation of the parents of the people that I have interviewed, particularly their fathers. These men would feel responsible - and they would constantly worry - about the destiny of the properties left behind, the precarious future of their families and their material survival. The last decades of their lives would be often spent in a silence reverberating on their children, through unspoken patterns of inter-generational transmission that recur among traumatised communities. These memories thus bear traces of feelings of loss and impotence, which negotiate vanishing images of marvellous places.

**Interviewee:** And, basically, the house was abandoned. To be exact: my father always hoped to move back in it, at some point, but they left it when moving to the new quarters of Tripoli. It was a house like those you can still find in Spain. There was a central court that hosted the soap factory, its boiler, and the family would live at the first floor. It was from the 1800, and it was wonderful for those times. My father used to say that the French Consulate held its reception in the salon with Murano glasses…. He used to talk about the day when he went with my uncle at the port to collect these chandeliers. How they were unloaded from the ship… In the house, there was also a piano, and a safe, where my father left some gold, and my grandmother's jewels, her enamelled jewels from Venice, her Venetian corals…everything was left there, there. [11]

In contrast with the image of abandonment, the story of the wonderful chandelier disembarking at the port conveys the memory of busy times and thriving business lead by men of exquisite taste and entrepreneurial spirit. On the other hand, the image of a lost treasure is a recurrent one in the memories of people who were forced to leave behind properties, personal belongings and material

[11] Interview with FF, Tel Aviv, 25/2/2013, MLM-CDEC. "E in pratica, questa casa è stata abbandonata; cioè, papà pensava sempre di tornare lì, l'hanno lasciata venendo nella città nuova, e quella era la casa che rimaneva ancora lì. Era una casa come quelle che ci sono ancora in Spagna, con il cortile che faceva da saponificio, c'era la caldaia, ecc, e le famiglie abitavano al primo piano, e l'hanno lasciata così com'era. Era del 1800, ed era fantastica per il tempo di allora; papà mi raccontava che il Consolato francese chiedeva il salone per fare i ricevimenti, e mi raccontava che c'erano due lampadari di Murano...mi raccontava di quando era andato con lo zio al porto a prenderli, quando sono stati scaricati; e poi c'era il pianoforte, e una cassaforte dove aveva lasciato i lingotti d'oro, i gioielli della nonna con lo smalto veneziano, i coralli veneziani...tutto là, lasciato lì"

heritage, such as family jewellery and other objects that would trace their trajectories across the Mediterranean.

The last example of fantasising intertwines the female lineage of a family and their Jewish heritage, through the written and oral narratives of a gentleman born in the 1950s. Being the last child of a family from Tripoli, and the only member of the family to be born in Rome, his memory of Libyan Jewish culture has drawn from family stories, food and cooking objects since ever. These memories combined with experiences of disjunctures between the tripolinian background and the environment of 1950s Rome, which would be equally familiar for him. Both the interviewee's writing on the family past and his participation to the interview project sprang from a feeling of nostalgia for his late mother and the festive atmosphere of the Jewish holidays of his childhood, 'that I was never able to transport completely in my home' and that he wishes to transmit to his children.[12] His account is firmly centred on the meaning and memories of food for the Jewish holidays, and his narrative structure details the gendered and family roles for the preparation of religious and social rituals, notably the complementary roles of him and his mother. Through a series of vivid and multisensorial images, he describes himself as the dutiful male child of a woman whom, "with the determination of a tripolinian mother" (*con la determinazione di una madre tripolina*) would send her little child to the *rabbi* with the chickens for the ritual *kapparah*. The poultry with whom he had played on the balcony at home would be slaughtered with much noise and blood in a shiny and immaculate bathroom of the neighbourhood - and the image of himself as a dazed child crossing the street with a bundle warmed by bleeding corpses is still vivid.

Scholarship on the cultural practices and representations of Jews of North Africa and the Middle East has early engaged with the role of food in conveying their memory across media and sensorial experiences (Bahloul, 1983; Tartakowsky, 2017). Food and its material culture are central to the performance and transmission of the memories of these Jewish communities in displacement: while used in the kitchen, displayed in community museums, or romanticised in a growing number of fictionalised accounts, recipes and cooking objects help to amalgamate scattered pieces and places of memory into narratives that must be transmitted to the next generations (Tartakowsky, 2017: 17). My interviewees are no exception, and cooking objects may have a special role in carrying their memories. The interviewee above pictures his mother at the centre of this family heritage:

I remember her surrounded by kitchen tools that we tripolinians cannot abandon, nor forget, and that my parents brought with them when they left Libya – we had plenty of those braziers and things in the kitchen…They may well hang in a museum today: grinders, some sort of pressure cooker, the metal Palestinian oven used to roast

[12] "...atmosfera di cui ho molta nostalgia e che non sono riuscito a trasportare completamente nella mia casa". Interview with GG, Rome, 03/7/2013, MLM-CDEC.

and cook bread, fans…I remember my mother always dedicated to us – the children – to cooking and to the traditions she would learn from her mother. [13]

This mother is remembered as the passionate carrier of a Libyan Jewish heritage conveyed through domestic and culinary culture. Her commitment to this task would triumph over the exotic taste of her cooking, which bear traces of her Middle Eastern, rather than Libyan, background. The latter was inherited from an extraordinary grandmother, who is evoked by the interviewee through a series of mesmerising images. A singer, dancer and independent young woman whom would travelled the Ottoman Empire with fellow Jewish artists and performers until a tempest thrown her on the Tripoli shores. She would subsequently fall in love with the interviewee's grandfather, and stayed in Tripoli with much scorn of the local women, who would disapprove her addiction to smoking, her collections of Oriental and performance clothing and her inclination for European fashion. Despite the initial resistances, the stranger woman, thanks to her lively character and good heart, managed to find a place in the community, eventually becoming a very popular midwife. Today, the interviewee is proud to be approached by eldest members of the Libyan Jewish community who are still mindful to have been delivered in his grandmother's hands.

The images of these two women as evoked in the interviewee's narrative bear traces of Orientalist fantasies, Jewish archetypes and desires of the narrator. 'My mother was really what you would call a Jewish mother - says GG – (…) she adored to be Jewish, and she wanted us to be proud of being Jews, and especially of living Jewishness'.[14] While illuminating trajectories of single women and mothers displaced across the Mediterranean at different times in history, these memories manifest the continuous processes of translation of Libyan Jewish heritage, their gendered patterns, and manifold media, which all convey the incessant desire to transmit this memory – in other words, a desire for future.

## Conclusion:

This article has examined at two interrelated levels images of home that convey the narratives of my interviewees. At one level, it has shed light on the domestic interiors, transcultural and multilingual practices of the Jewish bourgeoisie of Tripoli and Benghazi from the eve of the Italian occupation of Libya to the 1970s. At the other level, the article has explored the mnemonic processes of my

[13] «.. e poi me la ricordo circondata da utensili di cucina che noi tripolini non riusciamo ad abbandonare né a dimenticare e che mio padre e mia madre portarono con sé quando lasciarono la Libia, per cui in cucina eravamo pieni di bracieri, etc. che oggi potrebbero stare tranquillamente in un museo: macinini, specie di pentole a pressione, il forno palestinese, di metallo con un buco al centro che serviva per fare arrosti o il pane, ventagli...Mia madre la ricordo sempre dedita a noi figli, dedita ai fornelli e alle tradizioni imparate da sua madre. » Interview with GG, Rome, 03/7/2013, MLM-CDEC.

[14] « Mia madre è stata davvero quella che si dice "una madre ebrea" (…) Lei adorava il fatto di essere ebrea e voleva che anche noi fossimo fieri e orgogliosi di esserlo e di viverlo soprattutto, l'ebraismo » id.

interviewees, questioning how the past is remembered and how this may shape subjectivities in the present and the future. The images of home underpinning the self-narratives of my interviewees expose the emotional and intersubjective nature of memory. As individual narratives performed in a transnational mnemonic arena, these interviews remediate figures of identity and belonging, exposing how memory shapes contemporary processes of identification.

Between the 1860s and the 1970s, the families of my interviewees have traced transnational trajectories across the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, negotiating multiple forms of citizenship and (self)identification. The subjects of this study, and their ancestors, have been identified as Arabs, colonialists, Italians, Semites, Tripolinians, Sephardic, Arab Jews... Such categories resonate in the narratives of the interviewees, who connect, validate or reshape the figures in their background. The multiple languages embedded in their memories track processes of remembering and forgetting activated by power, emotions and agency. These mnemonic processes call for further investigation of the imperialist patterns of Italian language and culture in North Africa.

After decades of colonial and nationalist narratives of history, the memories and histories of Libya are more active than ever: they are being reclaimed and mobilized by multiple actors and locations. Their multiple languages – Italian, Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic, French, Amazigh... - track transnational trajectories and expose the transcultural nature of memory in our time. The dismantling of nationalist paradigms of knowledge now proceeds together with the critique of historical construction of monolingualism, opening new avenues for the study of individual and collective processes of identification. These develop transnational and language-sensitive approaches to the reading of human and cultural mobility.[15] Exploring a series of memories and transnational histories from Libya, this article wishes to stimulate further reflection on the movements of History in times of transcultural memories.

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[15] For conceptualisation of mobility, memory and translation of Italian culture across the world, including North Africa and the Mediterranean, see the AHRC Research Project *Transnationalizing Modern Languages: Mobility, Identity and Translation in Modern Italian Culture* (TML*)* http://www.transnationalmodernlanguages.ac.uk and Burdett, Charles, Loredana Polezzi and Barbara Spadaro, eds. *Transcultural Italies: Mobility, Memory and Translation*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, *forthcoming*. The present article has been developed under the TML Project umbrella.

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